

The Places In Between by Rory Stewart

Revisited by Elayne Jude, Great North News Services

In January 2002, Rory Stewart walked from Herat to Kabul, traversing, via a snowy massif a little above the country's waistline, almost the breadth of Afghanistan. The route followed that of Babur, the sixteenth century first Mogul Emperor of India. Stewart's duplication is mostly accidental, and a handy explanation for suspicious officials and wondering villagers. History, bureaucracy and international relations have interrupted his original walk across Iran, Pakistan, India and Nepal; with the fall of the Taliban, Stewart is able to resume his trek every step without using any vehicle. On one occasion, when he is forced to ford a swollen river near nightfall by jeep, he returns the following morning to the spot where his feet left the ground, and retraces the distance to the dropoff.

This quiet dogged obstinacy, proof against all sensible subversion, is displayed throughout the journey; or as Stewart puts it: "Because my boots stuck to the mud, I walked on the ice that had formed on the roadside ditches. This was better, except when the ice broke and soaked my feet in cold water...We had been walking for nine hours. There were only another fifteen kilometres to Daulatyar and probably two hours of daylight left but I had forgotten how much deep mud and wet snow could slow my pace...Exhaustion and repetition created within the pain a space of calm exhilaration and control. And at this point, I saw two jeeps, weaving slowly towards us through the fog...When they reached me, an electric window went down. It was the Special Forces team from the airstrip.

'You,' said the driver, 'are a fucking nutter'. Then he smiled and drove on, leaving me in the snow. I had seen these men at work when I was in the Army and in the Foreign Office and I couldn't imagine a better compliment. I walked on in a good mood."

The book was published in 2004; made a great success, was showered with praise, nominations and awards. Stewart went on to found the Turquoise Mountain Foundation to teach and preserve traditional crafts in Kabul as a way to restore and regenerate the old town. He was CPA deputy governor of the Iraqi provinces of Maysan and Dhi Qar, garnered an OBE and a fellowship at Harvard, gave evidence to a Commons Defence Committee enquiry into Afghanistan.

It remains highly topical - as well as very funny, deeply humane and beautifully paced. There simply aren't many accounts of this breadth and depth of "a society that was an unpredictable composite of etiquette, humour and extreme brutality". For that part of our readership represented in ISAF in the country, we cannot forget that devising proper remedies relies on correct diagnostics, and that getting it wrong wreaks incalculable damage.

Some high-profile exemplars of cack-handed faux-erudition are dissected by Stewart: Blair's

handling and discussion of the Koran would have struck Ali [a headman's son in the Hazara village of Ghorak] as highly eccentric. Blair could not have read the Koran because he could not read Arabic. Since the Koran, unlike the Bible, is the verbatim word of God, spoken through Muhammad in Arabic, a translation is not considered to be the Koran. At times, it has been considered blasphemous to translate it at all. Ali carefully wrapped his Koran, kept it in a wooden box on a high shelf and approached it only after ablutions and with a prayer. He would have been horrified to see Blair thumb through his translation on the plane or make confident statements about its meaning...public pronouncements on the meaning of the Koran are usually reserved for the most learned and senior of mullahs.

Blair's confidently casual handling of the text was not supposed to be patronizing or presumptuous. It was intended to display his sensitivity to Islamic culture. Perhaps he mistakenly assumed that the Koran resembled his Protestant vision of the Bible, which can be translated without problem; easily understood, free of apocrypha; open to interpretation by lay people and physically to be handled much like any other book. This may also be true of other Protestant Christian commentators such as Bush. In November 2001, there was a photograph of Bush casually dragging a Koran across the table with his unclean left hand, while the mullah who presented it struggled to smile."

Stewart describes the policy makers and political advisers in country in 2002:

"Most of the policymakers knew next to nothing about the villages where 90 percent of the population of Afghanistan lived. They came from post-modern, secular, globalised states with liberal traditions in law and government...But what did they understand of the thought processes of Seyyed Kerbalahi's wife, who had not moved more than five kilometres from her home in forty years? Or Dr Habibullah the vet, who carried an automatic weapon in the way they carried a briefcase?...The people of Kamenj understood political power in terms of their feudal lord Haji Mohsin Khan. Ismail Khan in Herat wanted a social order based on Iranian political Islam.

"Hazara such as Ali hated the idea of centralised government because they associated it with the domination of other ethnic groups and with their suffering under the Taliban. These differences between groups were deep, elusive, and very difficult to overcome....Their policy makers did not have the time, structures or resources for a serious study of an alien culture. They justified their lack of knowledge and experience by focusing on poverty and implying that dramatic cultural differences did not exist...Even within a week's walk I had come across areas where the local begs had been toppled by Iranian-funded social revolution and others where feudal structures were still in place, areas where the violence had been inflicted by the Taliban and areas where the villagers were inflicting it on each other. Policy makers were unable to devote the time, imagination and persistence needed to understand these diverse experiences. It was therefore almost impossible for them to change Afghan society in the way they wished to change it".

Verdict : Still required reading.

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He was accompanied on his journey by the mastiff Babur, who had lived all his life in a village where he was considered an unclean and therefore untouchable animal. Afghan dogs customarily have their ears and tails docked to make them less vulnerable in dogfights. Babur had also had most of his teeth smashed by a stone, for biting a villager.

Nowzad Dogs, a charity set up and run by a former Royal Marine and a group of unpaid volunteers, works to make the lives of Afghan dogs and other animals rather less nasty, short and brutish: <http://www.nowzaddogs.co.uk/>

Defence Viewpoints published an illustrated article on Nowzad Dogs on 18 March 2009 under the title "Dogs of war redux"